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ABSTRACT

This comparison of standards-based reform with rural school improvement efforts that emphasize locally responsive, place-based curricula reveals differences and similarities in the two movements. The standards-based movement is focused on setting state and national standards that all students must meet, suggesting a common curricular focus. Most advocates of standards-based reform advocate some local discretion. Rural school improvement is focused on teaching children knowledge and skills within the context of their local communities to prepare them for effective participation at the local as well as state and national levels. Standards would be developed within local communities. Explicit in this approach is the desire to sustain rural communities and lifeways. Despite their differences, the two movements share two important goals: promoting greater educational equity and increasing the intellectual rigor of classroom curricula and pedagogy. If place-based curricula are to coexist with and complement standards-based reforms, three key issues must be resolved. First, if standards are developed locally, how will schools be helped to develop local assessments tied to those standards and how would they be held accountable? If state assessments tied to accountability mechanisms are imposed, how can those assessments be responsive to locally developed curricula? Second, what kind of professional development assistance do teachers need to develop experiential curricula tied to state standards but centered on the community, and who will provide this assistance? Finally, how can parents and community members be involved in creating standards that are uniformly high for all students but responsive to local needs? (Contains 21 notes.) (TD)

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Rural Education Issue Digest

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Similarities, Differences, Prospects for the Future

by Patricia J. Kannapel

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Rural Education
Issue Digest

Standards-Based Reform and Rural School Improvement:

Similarities, Differences, Prospects for the Future

by Patricia J. Kannapel

Since the 1980s, there has developed in the United States a push for national and/or state academic standards defining what students should know and be able to do by the time they graduate from high school. The movement evolved out of a call for education reform sparked by the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. After initial reform efforts following its publication were viewed by some as too prescriptive and focused on the *quantity* of curricular and instructional delivery (such as increasing the time students spent studying specific subjects), the focus shifted to the *quality* of the core academic content being taught in public schools. The publication of national mathematics standards in 1989 by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics as well as the endorsement of national educational goals by the nation's governors and President Bush that same year launched a push for academic standards that led to the development of national standards documents in at least 12 subject areas. The result is that standards-based reform has become an integral feature of states' plans for school improvement.[1]

The call for national and state academic standards concerns many who study or work in rural schools in the United States. Already dismayed by what they perceived to be the standardized and generic nature of schooling wrought by over a century of state and national reform, a small but determined group of rural education researchers and advocates have championed curricula and pedagogy that centered on understanding and sustaining local communities.[2]

This digest compares and contrasts the tenets and strategies of standards-based reform with those of rural school improvement efforts that emphasize locally responsive, place-based curricula and pedagogy, then proposes a middle ground.

Organizations and Thinkers Leading the Two Movements

The standards-based reform movement has been promoted and influenced by several individuals and organizations since the early 1990s. The National Center on Education and the Economy, under the leadership of Marc Tucker and Lauren Resnick, has promoted, developed, and marketed reform programs centered on content and performance standards for students. Leading the charge for the standards-based movement in the policy research arena are researchers and academics affiliated with the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), which "unites researchers from five of the nation's leading research institutions to improve elementary and secondary education through research on policy, finance, school reform, and school governance."[3] The five institutions referenced are the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard University, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. CPRE is directed by Susan H. Fuhrman,

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dean of the graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. CPRE researchers who have studied and advocated for standards-based reform include David Cohen, Richard Elmore, Diane Massell, Jennifer O'Day, and Andrew Porter.[3]

Until 1995, rural school improvement efforts were advocated by individual researchers and academics scattered across the United States. This group included Alan DeYoung, Toni Haas, Craig Howley, Paul Nachtigal, Jonathan Sher, and Paul Theobald. In 1995, many of these leaders developed and submitted a proposal to philanthropist Walter Annenberg, who then funded a five-year effort to improve rural schools. The Annenberg Rural Challenge was formed and has led the charge for rural school improvement since that time. The organization is now known as the Rural School and Community Trust, a "virtual" organization with a small national staff led by President Rachel B. Tompkins. The mission of the Trust is "to enlarge student learning and improve community life by strengthening relationships between rural schools and communities and engaging students in community-based public work."[4]

Two Schools of Thought

The two groups—advocates of standards-based reform and advocates of rural school improvement—uniformly decry the mediocrity they say has resulted from the standardized, factory approach to schooling that evolved during the industrial age and has persisted to the present. The groups differ, however, in their fundamental orientations and commitments. The standards-based movement is focused on developing uniform state or national standards to prepare students for national citizenry, often framed in terms of preparing students to compete in a national and global economy. While some rural education scholars believe that standards-based reform is focused singularly on economic competitiveness, Marshall Smith, Susan Fuhrman, and Jennifer O'Day state that uniform standards would serve multiple purposes: increase U.S. economic competitiveness, prepare students to participate in a democracy, encourage states to raise expectations for students, improve the quality of education, and create greater equality of educational opportunity. Many advocates of standards-based reform believe that state and national standards should leave room for locally responsive curricula, but they are sketchy on details of how this would work, and equally sketchy on the role parents and community members should play in school reform.[5]

In contrast to this national focus, those who advocate rural school improvement believe that curriculum and pedagogy should be grounded in the community context so that students learn how to become productive citizens of the local community as well as the larger society. Like proponents of standards-based reform, rural school advocates seek to improve student learning, but they also seek to strengthen relationships between rural schools and communities and engage students in community-based public work. At the heart of this movement is a desire to sustain and energize local communities through educating children about local ecological, political, economic, and governmental systems, as well as local knowledge and culture.[6]

While the standards-based movement's emphasis on preparing students for global competitiveness and national citizenry differs in orientation from the rural school improvement focus on preparing students for citizenry centered on the local community, the movements share two important goals: promoting greater educational equity and increasing the intellectual rigor of classroom curricula and pedagogy.

Equity. Joseph Murphy identifies educational equity as a fundamental principle of the standards-based movement through its stance that all children can learn, that schools are responsible for ensuring that this learning occurs, and that they should do so through adapting instructional approaches within the regular curriculum rather than isolating disadvantaged students in remedial programs. Smith and O'Day assert that the unifying goals that they advocate for all schools must embody democratic values critical to the society: respect for all people, tolerance, equality of opportunity, respect for the individual, participation in the democratic process, and service to the society. Diane Massell, Michael Kirst, and Margaret Hoppe state that "by focusing on raising academic expectations for all students, standards-based reforms interweave equity with academic excellence policies."[7]

For a number of years, advocates for rural school improvement focused less on equity for individual students and more on keeping rural communities viable through their schools. Equity, if it was dealt with at all, was framed primarily in terms of the lack of equity of resources between rural and urban/suburban school districts. By 1999, however, the Rural Challenge policy statement on standards had taken a strong stance on educational equity, stating that content standards should be high enough to be challenging to all students, and that "neither local control nor high standards is an acceptable excuse for using public schools to enforce social injustices, to teach discrimination, or to counsel hatred" (p. 60). The policy statement also asserts that locally generated standards should embody an educational mission to help *all* children develop their intellectual capacity.[8]

Intellectual rigor. Central to the mission of standards-based reform is the goal of increasing the intellectual rigor of curricula and pedagogy on the rationale that classroom activity has traditionally been dull, perfunctory, and disconnected from "real life." Proponents of standards-based reform argue that teacher-directed, fact-based instruction must be replaced with a new model of "teaching for understanding" in which students engage in active problem solving in order to develop conceptual understanding of subject matter.[9]

Similarly, rural school improvement advocates believe that curricula and instruction should be intellectually rigorous, although they believe that the context for curriculum and instruction is as important as content. The Rural Challenge policy statement asserts that "teachers need to teach from the experience of the community to intellectually rigorous standards" (p. 60). Craig B. Howley and Aimee Howley believe that rural schooling should "animate the intellect" (p. 129) in ways that help children become more thoughtful members of the local community as well as the larger society.[10]

Control of Standards, Curricula, and Pedagogy

Proponents of standards-based reform believe that standards and curriculum frameworks should be defined by the state, while local school personnel should be responsible for defining the curriculum and selecting strategies to help students meet the standards.[11] Smith and O'Day offer the following analogy:

One way to picture this relationship is through the analogy of a voyage. The state, through the curriculum frameworks and in consultation with teachers and district personnel, provides a description of the ultimate destination of the journey. Teachers and other school people then have the primary responsibility to chart the course, assemble the necessary provisions and crew, and pilot the ship.[12]

Smith and O'Day suggest no role for parents and the community in standards-setting or major decision-making, stating only that schools should develop mechanisms for parent involvement. Other standards-based reformers are more equivocal on this issue, however. Massell notes that determining who participates in the agenda-setting process is a key decision that can affect the balance between two competing goals: (1) generating standards that have broad public and professional consensus; and (2) generating cutting-edge standards that can move public education beyond the status quo. Similarly, Fuhrman, Elmore, and Massell state that "employers, college officials, and parents must come to understand and value challenging notions of learning if they are to reinforce school reform," thus implying a need to convince parents and the public to buy into a particular type of reform. These same authors also state, "One way to educate the public and professionals, to enlist their important insights and expertise, and to grant them ownership of the reform enterprise is to involve them in the development of standards for students" (p. 14). Generally, standards-based reformers recognize that public support is needed to sustain reform, but indicate a preference for an approach that gains parent and public support for state-generated standards through public relations and parent involvement strategies.[13]

Rural education advocates are much less equivocal about who should be involved in setting education standards. Initially, some rural advocates questioned the very notion of standard setting, suggesting that education outcomes should not be predetermined but should arise from individual situations. Since 1998,

however, there have been numerous exchanges and writings among the rural audience about the feasibility of combining standards-based reform with locally responsive curricula. In 1999, the Rural Challenge issued a policy statement advocating standards that originate in local communities and that are widely shared and understood by all community members. The policy statement goes on to assert that the challenge for the standards movement is not to coax adoption of high standards, but to generate them from within local communities.[14]

Strategies for School Improvement

There are areas of congruence and conflict between the views of standards-based reformers and rural school improvement advocates regarding appropriate strategies for school improvement. The greatest congruence lies in the area of pedagogy and, to a lesser degree, the kind of standards that are needed. The greatest source of conflict is in the area of assessment and accountability. In addition, professional development for teachers to teach under each of these approaches to school improvement is better articulated by standards-based reformers than by rural school improvement advocates. Each of these topics is considered below.

Kinds of standards needed. Both standards-based reformers and rural-school improvement advocates believe that standards are needed in the area of curriculum content. Rural advocates as well as some (but by no means all) standards-based reformers also identify a need for "opportunity to learn" or learning conditions standards. Where the two groups differ, however, is that rural school improvement advocates call for including *context standards* in the standards-setting process. Context standards call for using the community and native environment as the context for teaching to the content standards. Standards-based reformers, on the other hand, do not prescribe the context in which content standards will be taught.[15]

Classroom pedagogy. Both groups support local autonomy in making decisions about classroom pedagogy but advocate instructional strategies that involve students actively in solving real-life problems. Some researchers have pointed out that many community-based projects model the kinds of instruction called for by advocates of standards-based reform.[16]

Assessment and accountability. Perhaps the greatest point of conflict between the two approaches to school improvement is in the area of assessment and accountability. Standards-based reformers call for holding schools accountable for state standards through statewide assessment. At the same time, some standards-based advocates acknowledge that tying accountability to a state test can inhibit local creativity and initiative. Indeed, studies of state standards-based reform efforts have shown that tested content sometimes crowds out local curricula.[17]

Two recent virtual discussions on standards-based reform in rural schools—one hosted by AEL, Inc., and the other by the Rural Challenge—revealed that one of the greatest concerns of rural school advocates is the emphasis in standards-based reform on high-stakes testing, which has the potential to dictate what is taught in schools and drive out locally developed curricula. The Rural Challenge policy statement on standards expresses support for assessments linked to standards that are used to measure students' progress and to give guidance to their teachers, and also notes that student assessments can help measure the effectiveness of a school and its reform efforts. However, because rural school improvement advocates believe that standards should be developed locally, the inference is that assessment and accountability systems should also be locally determined–although the policy statement does not address this issue outright.[18]

Teacher professional development. Professional development for teachers to teach to high academic standards, and to adapt instruction to reach *all* students, is identified as an integral part of standards-based reform. Specifically, standards-based reformers call for such strategies as establishing regional service centers within states to provide easier access to professional development and technical assistance, creating teacher networks, providing technical assistance in schools and classrooms, and providing teachers with specific curriculum guidance and models that are tied to state standards.[19]

In contrast, rural school improvement advocates have not articulated a strategy for preparing teachers to teach to high academic standards within the local community context. Some rural writers and researchers, however, have identified resources and strategies

that teachers might employ if they choose to teach in this way.[20]

The Middle Ground

This comparison of standards-based reform and rural school improvement has delineated several ways in which the two movements differ, but has also shown how they are compatible. The standards-based movement is focused on setting state and national standards that all students must meet, suggesting a common curricular focus that would equip students to participate in national society. These standards would necessarily be developed through representation that cuts across local communities and constituencies. Most advocates of standards-based reform advocate broad state and national standards that leave some room for local discretion.

Rural school improvement, on the other hand, is focused on teaching children knowledge and skills within the context of their local communities so that they will be prepared to participate effectively locally as well as at state and national levels. Standards would be developed within local communities, resulting in different standards in different places. Explicit in this approach is the desire to sustain rural communities and lifeways.

Both movements strongly support educational equity and intellectual rigor in curriculum and instruction, suggesting that there is middle ground between the two movements. In one of the few research projects that considered this question, Nancy Jennings documented that in rural Maine schools where place-based curricula had historically played only a marginal role, state standards pushed locally responsive curricula even deeper into the background. In schools where place-based curricula were already well-established, however, state standards sometimes contributed to or enhanced this focus. For instance, a rural school on the Canadian border that had already established a bilingual program became a model for the state when state standards endorsed foreign language instruction in elementary schools. Similarly, when geology faculty at a local college obtained a grant to study groundwater, they designed middle school activities to study local groundwater that fit with state middle school standards on hydrology. As a result, many middle school teachers participated in the project.[21]

Jennings' work suggests three key issues that must be resolved if the place-based curricula envisioned by rural school improvement advocates is to co-exist with, and perhaps even complement, the more clearly articulated standards-based reform movement.

1. **Assessment and accountability.** If standards are developed locally (as envisioned by rural school improvement advocates), how will schools be helped to develop local assessments tied to those standards, and what purpose would the assessments serve? How would schools be held accountable? And if state assessments tied to accountability mechanisms are imposed (as advocated by standards-based reformers), how can those assessments be made responsive to locally developed curricula?
2. **Teacher professional development.** What kind of assistance and time do teachers need to develop experiential curriculum units tied to state standards but centered on the community, and who will provide this assistance?
3. **Parent and community involvement.** How can parents and community members be involved in creating standards that are uniformly high for all students but responsive to local needs?

Clearly, there is a need for targeted research such as that conducted by Jennings to determine what conditions promote a complementary relationship between place-based curricula and state standards.

Notes

1. See National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE), *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1983); D. Massell, M. Kirst, and M. Hoppe, *Persistence and Change: Standards-Based Reform in Nine States*, Report No. 37, CPRE Research Report Series (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, Consortium for Policy Research in Education [CPRE], 1997); National Council of Teachers of Mathematics [NCTM], *Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics* (Reston, VA: NCTM, 1989); E. L. Baker and R. L. Linn, *Emerging Educational Standards of Performance in the United States*, CSE Technical Report 437 (Los Angeles: Univ. of California, National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing [CRESST], 1997); and R. J. Marzano, J. S. Kendall, and L. F. Cicchinelli, *What Americans Believe Students Should Know: A Survey of U.S. Adults* (Aurora, CO: Mid-Continental Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999) www.mcrel.org/survey/ (10 October 2000).

2. See P. J. Kannapel and A. J. DeYoung, "The Rural School Problem in 1999: A Review and Critique of the Literature," *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 15*(2): 67-79 (1999); T. Haas and R. Lambert, "To Establish the Bonds of Common Purpose and Mutual Enjoyment," *Phi Delta Kappan, 77*(2): 136-42 (1995); T. Haas and P. Nachtigal, *Place Value: An Educator's Guide to Good Literature on Rural Lifeways, Environments, and Purposes of Education* (Charleston, WV: ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, 1998); C. B. Howley, "How to Make Rural Education Research *Rural*: An Essay at Practical Advice," *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 13*(2): 131-38 (1997); J. P. Sher, "The Battle for the Soul of Rural School Reform: Can the Annenburg Rural Challenge Turn the Tide?, *Phi Delta Kappan, 77*(2):143-48 (1995); and P. Theobald, *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride, and the Renewal of Community* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997).

3. See J. O'Neil, "On the New Standards Project: A Conversation with Lauren Resnick and Warren Simmons," *Educational Leadership, 50*(5), 1993. www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/9302/oneil2.html (10 July 2000); CPRE, "Mission Statement and History," CPRE Web home page. www.gse.upenn.edu.cpre/ (10 July 2000).

4. See Sher; and Rural School and Community Trust, "Mission Statement," Trust Web home page. www.ruraledu.org (10 October 2000).

5. See P. J. Kannapel, *Education Reform in Kentucky: Expert Theory, Folk Theory, and the Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990*, Master's Thesis, Univ. of Kentucky, Department of Anthroplogy, 1991; Kannapel and DeYoung; Sher; Howley; M. Tucker, letter to Hillary Clinton, available on Web home page of Vermont People for Integrity in Education. www.rstennison.com/obe/marc_tucker.html (10 July 2000); Haas and Nachtigal; M. S. Smith, S. H. Fuhrman, and J. O'Day, "National Curriculum Standards: Are They Desirable or Feasible?" in R. F. Elmore and S. H. Fuhrman (eds.), *The Governance of Curriculum: The 1994 Yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development*, 12-29 (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1994); and M. S. Smith and J. O'Day, "Systemic School Reform," in S. H. Fuhrman and B. Malen (eds.), *The Politics of Curriculum and Testing: The 1990 Yearbook of the Politics of Education Association*, 233-67 (London: Falmer Press, 1991).

6. See Haas and Nachtigal; see also Rural School and Community Trust.

7. See J. Murphy, Restructuring Schooling: The Equity Infrastructure," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 4*(2): 111-30 (1993); also Smith and O'Day; and Massell, Kirst, and Hoppe, 49.

8. See N. Khattri, K. W. Riley, and M. B. Kane, "Students at Risk in Poor, Rural Areas: A Review of the Research," *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 13*(2): 79-100 (1997) ; also Rural Challenge, "An Invitation to Discuss Standards in Public Schools: A Policy Statement of the Rural Challenge," *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 15*(1): 59-63 (1999).

9. See R. F. Elmore, "Introduction: On Changing the Structure of Public Schools," in R. F. Elmore and Associates (eds), *Restructuring Schools: The*

Next Generation of Educational Reform, 1-28 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990); S. H. Fuhrman, R. F. Elmore, and D. Massell, "School Reform in the United States: Putting it into Context" in S. L. Jacobsen and R. Berne (eds.), *Reforming Education: The Emerging Systemic Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1993); and Smith and O'Day.

10. See Rural Challenge, "An Invitation"; also C. B. Howley and A. Howley, "The Power of Babble: Technology and Rural Education," *Phi Delta Kappan, 77*(2): 19 (1995).

11. See Fuhrman, Elmore, and Massell; and Smith and O'Day.

12. Smith and O'Day, 254.

13. See D. Massell, "Achieving Consensus: Setting the Agenda for State Curriculum Reform," in R. F. Elmore and S. H. Fuhrman (eds.), *The Governance of Curriculum: The 1994 Yearbook of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development,* 12-29 (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 1994); also Fuhrman, Elmore, and Massell, p. 14.

14. See Haas and Lambert; AEL, Inc., *Are Today's Schools Teaching Rural Children How to Live Well in Their Own Communities?* Transcript from listserv conversation with Toni Haas, Paul Nachtigal, and others, March 13-17, 2000. http://www.ascd.org/frameedlead.html (10 October 2000); T. Haas, "A Reply to Kannapel, Coe, Aagaard, and Reeves," *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 15*(1): 16 (1999); N. E. Jennings, *Standards and Local Curriculum: A Zero-Sum Game?,* paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA. 2000; P. J. Kannapel, P. Coe, L. Aagaard, and C. A. Reeves, "A Rejoinder to Toni Haas' Reply, *Journal of Research in Rural Education, 15*(1): 17-18 (1999); Kannapel and DeYoung; Rural Challenge, *Public School Standards: Discussing the Case for Community Control: A Report on the Electronic Symposium Hosted by the Rural Challenge, November 1998–February 1999.* www.ruraledu.org/esymposium/esymposium2.html (10 October 2000); and Rural Challenge, *An Invitation.*

15. See Rural Challenge, *An Invitation;* and Smith, Fuhrman, and O'Day.

16. See Elmore; Rural Challenge, *An Invitation.* Smith and O'Day; Jennings; and Kannapel and DeYoung.

17. See Smith, Fuhrman, and O'Day; Smith and O'Day; Jennings; and P. J. Kannapel, L. Aagaard, P. Coe, and C. A. Reeves, *Elementary Change: Moving Toward Systemic School Reform in Rural Kentucky* (Charleston, WV: AEL, Inc., 2000).

18. See AEL, Inc.; Rural Challenge, *Public School Standards;* and Rural Challenge, *An Invitation.*

19. See D. Massell, *State Strategies for Building Local Capacity: Addressing the Needs of Standards-Based Reform,* CPRE Policy Brief (Philadelphia: CPRE, 1998); and Smith and O'Day.

20. See Haas and Nachtigal; and Theobald.

21. See Jennings.

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